

About *Food History News*

Over the years, *Food History News* has been described as idiosyncratic, wonderful, and terribly serious depending on the reviewer. For the last 12 years, the newsletter has addressed the ridiculous—including 18th- and 19th-century food humor; the sublime—a comprehensive history of apple pies; and the truly esoteric—why blue plate specials are so-called. *Food History News* is now read by modern chefs, distinguished scholars, food writers, museum professionals, and best of all, the general public.

Dedicated largely to the food history of North America, the newsletter was inaugurated in June 1989, the result of an enduring personal fascination which developed many years earlier when I created a fireplace cooking program at the Mystic Seaport Museum, an internationally renowned maritime history center in Connecticut. In the fall of 1988, I attended a symposium co-sponsored by the American Folklore Society and the Culinary Historians of Boston, which celebrated their 10th anniversary that year. A multi-disciplinary blend of academics, independent scholars, and research staff from living history museums participated. It was there that I realized how most living history and house museum professionals could benefit from knowledge about and access to the diverse research that many scholars were undertaking regarding historic foodways. Likewise, these researchers, many of whom it was clear had never actually done historic food preparation, would

benefit from the practical experience of living history cooks. This insight was one of several that eventually resulted in development of *Food History News*. The first issue was distributed free at the Association for Living Historical Farms and Agriculture Museums 1989 annual conference in Indiana.

Museum professionals formed the initial core subscribership with other interested readers gradually joining over time. Of the two original targeted markets, academic-based subscribers remain in the minority and seem to benefit less from the practice of historic cooking. However, many others have joined in the conversation and their questions and contributions enrich the coverage of historic foodways.

A lot has happened in the field of food history since *Food History News* initiated publication. Many people, with more diverse interests, have discovered the topic. For example in 1989, only three culinary historian organizations located in Boston, Ann Arbor, and New York existed in the United States. Currently, there are at least 10 food history-related organizations, plus a few less formal aggregations of interested people who gather from time to time to hear a speaker or present papers on food history topics. In 1989, few colleges or universities offered courses in food history. Occasionally, anthropology or folklore professors would address food and culture from a historic perspective. Less than half a dozen universities grudgingly allowed graduate students to focus on food history as part of a masters or doctoral program. Today, there are many schools where one can study food history within established history, anthropology, ethnology, or folklore departments. It is now even possible to take a food history course via the Internet.

Food History News has watched, reported on, and possibly fostered the increase in food history research and publications. University presses now reprint early cook books and older volumes on historic foodways. Mainstream publishers regularly promote new books on food history topics. Current cookbooks often include historical information in the recipe head notes; food magazines also frequently print stories based on food his-

Gervase Markham, in the *English Housewife*, 1615, says this about seasoning: "when a broth is too sweet, sharpen it with verjuice; when too tart, sweeten it with sugar; when flat and wallowish, to quicken it with oranges and lemons; and when too bitter, to make it pleasant with herbs and spices." Who decides what to do about the flavor, Markham notes, is "according to the fancy of the cook, or the will of the householder."

A list of the most essential seasonings for 17th century cookery:

HERBS

Parsley	Savory
Marjoram	Sorrel
Rosemary	Spinach
Sage	
Thyme	
Spices	
Cinnamon	Mace
Cloves	Nutmeg
Ginger	Pepper

Others:

Salt
 Sugar
 Verjuice
 Lemon juice, peels, fruit
 Orange juice, peels, fruit
 Vinegar
 Rosewater

The following items also appear, but with less frequent mention:

Anchovies	Garlic
Anise seeds	Hyssop
Bay leaves	
Marigold flowers	
Borage	Mint
Burnet	Mustard
Capers	
Orange-flower water	
Chervil	Scallions
Coriander seeds	
Spearmint	
Fennel	Tarragon
Strawberry leaves	
Sweet Woodruff	
Violet leaves and flowers	

Illustrations from
 Food History
 News.

tory. Conferences and symposia on this topic are now hardly the rare event they were when *Food History News* first appeared.

Irregularly published but appearing four times a year, *Food History News* has expanded from an average of 8 pages to 12 or 14. The newsletter has shifted its focus from the museum professional to a more general readership. A popular series in *Food History News* has been the “old saws.” Common myths and folklore about food history are deconstructed, such as the poisonous tomatoes myth or the historic use of spices to

cover up spoiled meat. Assumed truisms, like women catching their skirts on fire in the hearth, are also examined. Future issues will continue to examine persistent “myth-takes” including Marco Polo bringing pasta back from the Orient, the origin of Anadama bread, and George Washington and peppercorn soup.

Food History News also contains a regular column entitled the “Joy of Historical Cooking” which traces the chronology and evolution of a particular recipe or food stuff. We frequently tackle the hard stuff, such as the complexities of chemical leavenings. A future issue will feature historic information about samp and hominy. Headline stories might report on recent conferences, symposia, the state of food history publishing, great ideas for food heritage vacations, or profiles of food historians and their work. Research on faux food-making is underway and a fall vacation trip to the Hudson River valley is being planned. In every issue, there is a section dedicated to military-related food history. Our directory, “People, Places, and Things,” provides sources for culinary reproductions, organizations, libraries, hard-to-find foods, booksellers, and many other things of interest to food historians. “Reader’s Exchange” is a forum for subscribers to pose questions, announce events and publications, and trade information. Occasionally, an entire issue of *Food History News* has been dedicated to a unifying theme, such as crackers and hardtack. Another thematic newsletter will focus upon the history and use of apples.

Food History News is developing a web site and an electronic version of the newsletter, including a special “On This Day in Food History” feature. Electronic subscription sign-up or renewal service will also be provided.

Food History News offers flexible internships for students and other interested individuals who are considering work in the field of food history. Inquiries concerning internships, subscriptions, back issues, or other pertinent information should be directed to Sandy Oliver, Publisher/Editor, *Food History News*, 1061 Main Road, Islesboro, ME 04848 (telephone: 207-734-8140, e-mail: sandyo@mint.net).

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